

Tips Regarding Letters of Recommendation

Strong letters of recommendation greatly influence who will become a fellowship finalist or be admitted to the best graduate schools. With this in mind, the following tips will help you have greater success in obtaining these important references:

- ***Develop relationships that will lead to strong letters***

The best letters of recommendation are an outgrowth of longstanding relationships you have developed with faculty members or other mentors. You will want your letters to speak not only to your academic and other public accomplishments, but also to your character and to your development over an extended period of time. The best letters legitimate and round out the picture you provide of yourself-and your recommenders will only be positioned to write such letters if they have had more than superficial exposure to you. One way to get to know faculty and other mentors is to approach them as advisors. Discuss your larger interests and goals. Ask for their advice about potential projects, reading, courses of study, graduate programs. These conversations will be invaluable in themselves, and they will allow you to judge who are likely to be your most enthusiastic recommenders. These meetings will also allow those who write for you to write more informed and more personally engaged letters. Invest in your future by getting to know faculty and other mentors: help them to see your best qualities, your strengths, growth, and interests.

- ***Before you ask, look at the big picture***

Before you approach anyone for a letter of reference, identify the number of recommenders that you will need for each application. Use the application material to help you choose the best letter writers. Consider what aspects of your background you will want each recommendation to comment on to support your application to a particular program or foundation. Seek a mix of letter writers, each of whom will play a different role in rounding out a portrait of your candidacy. Collectively, your letters should present a balanced picture of you. It is helpful to letter writers if you tell them you hope they will comment on you from a certain angle in their letter.

- ***WHO - Choose a reference you know well***

Recommenders (even famous ones) who are only marginally familiar with you and your work will, at best, write generic recommendations that will not help your cause. Ask faculty who know you well and who will be able to discuss in detail what distinguishes you. Normally, these are faculty who worked with you in a small group setting, on a specific project for an extended period of time.

- ***WHEN – Timing your request***

Ask well in advance of the deadline. If at all possible, you should ask the writer for a letter of recommendation at least two months before the deadline. Three weeks before the deadline should be considered the minimum advance notice.

Avoid asking a potential recommender for a letter after class, in the hallway, or via email. Instead, make an appointment to discuss what you are applying for and the kind of help you need.

- ***Ask directly, tactfully***

Ask: "Do you feel you know me (or my academic record, my leadership qualities) well enough to write a strong letter of recommendation for . . . ?" Most faculty will be more than happy to write enthusiastic recommendations on your behalf, but you want to give them the opportunity to decline gracefully.

- ***Trust your intuition***

If a potential recommender seems reluctant, seek someone else. The person may be inappropriate, too busy, or may not know you well enough to write a good letter. A lukewarm recommendation can only hurt your candidacy.

- ***Allow the recommendation to remain confidential***
On an application form for a scholarship or graduate school, you will be asked if you wish to waive your right to access your letters of reference. Do so. The letter writer will likely be more comfortable and probably more forthright, and the selection committee will respect this.
- ***WHAT – Provide support materials for more complete consideration***
It is essential to give the letter writer all materials that will help her or him write a specific and detailed letter.

These include:

- Relevant background materials
 - Brief description of the program or fellowship to which you are applying, a synopsis of selection criteria and a link to the fellowship's or program's website
 - Any instructions provided by the program or foundation for recommenders
 - To whom each letter should be addressed (individual or committee, relevant titles, mailing address)
 - A current resume or curriculum vitae (academic resume) [link to document]-or an informative description of your activities and honors, research experience, community service, conference papers/presentations, creative or leadership experiences
 - Your transcript (unofficial is fine) with explanation of any extenuating circumstances (family or other responsibilities, etc.) if applicable, for less than stellar grades
 - Past papers or exams are especially helpful
 - A draft of your personal statement, career plans, foreign travel experience (if applicable), extracurricular activities.
 - A draft of your project proposal, if applicable
 - Reminders about the work you have done for this professor that highlights what makes you a strong candidate.
 - An exact deadline for the letter's completion. Be sure to distinguish between a "postmark" and a "received by" due date. Remember that when a fellowship requires an "institutional nomination," [link to definition] or requires that your application materials be forwarded by your academic institution, Pacific's internal deadline for receipt of materials will be before the foundation's deadline.
 - If applicable, a recommendation form with your identifying information filled in, and signed by you.
 - Indicate whether the recommendation letter will be non-confidential (you will have access to it), or confidential (you will not have access to it). Waiving your right to view the recommendation is strongly advised, as selection committees usually do not take non-restricted letters seriously.
 - Forms, mailing instructions and supplies; as a professional courtesy (and to ensure that you, rather than your reference, are in charge of getting the address correct), give the writer a stamped, addressed envelope in which to mail the letter.
 - Whether recommendation should be mailed directly to the graduate school or funding agency (as in the case of the Rhodes, NSF, or Soros), sent to the campus advisor for inclusion in the application packet (for fellowships such as the Marshall, Goldwater, Truman or Udall, or for medical schools or other similar graduate applications), or submitted online.
- ***Invite feedback on your materials***
Use your recommenders' suggestions to improve your application.
 - ***Follow up before the recommendation deadline***
It may be helpful to ask your recommenders whether they would like you to remind them of the deadline in a week or so. In any event, gently remind the letter writer of the due date until you know that the recommendation has been sent.
 - ***Be communicative about your candidacy***
Express sincere appreciation to your letter writers (handwritten notes are an appealing way to convey your thanks), and keep them informed of your progress. Regardless of whether or not you receive the fellowship, are admitted to your top graduate school, or develop new plans for your life, maintaining follow-up contact with your references is both courteous and professionally smart.

** This advice has been adapted from a handout provided by Jane Curlin, Willamette University.*

** Information also included from Joe Schall's article, "References Available Upon Request," Graduating Engineer and Computer Careers Online. <http://www.graduatingengineer.com/articles/20081202/References-Available-Upon-Request> This site is worth visiting as Schall has some interesting stories to tell about his experience as a recommendation letter writer.*